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SUBJECT: LEBANON: INTERIOR MINISTER MURR DISCUSSES  
SECURITY, ELECTORAL ISSUES

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent M. Battle; reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with Interior Minister Elias Murr October 31 to discuss Hizballah interference with an embassy motorcade, progress on the McDonalds bombing investigation, and the preparation of municipalities/electoral laws. Murr comprehends the seriousness of Hizballah interference with an embassy motorcade, especially since the convoy was being escorted by officers from his Ministry. Murr said Hizballah officials told him the incident resulted from "misbehavior" by its personnel -- not Hizballah policy. With the arrest of a Yemeni thought to be the mastermind of the April 5 McDonalds bombing, GOL authorities are looking into possible al-Qaida/UBL links, including funding connections. The Minister is planning to introduce sweeping changes in a new electoral law and to implement electronic voting for the 2005 parliamentary elections. End summary.

Hizballah motorcade incident  
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12. (C) Ambassador reviewed with Minister Murr the incidents of interference with an embassy motorcade in south Lebanon October 17, thanking the Minister for provision of an Internal Security Forces (ISF) escort for the trip. He expressed Washington and the Embassy's concern and noted that we are still awaiting the GOL's official report.

13. (C) Minister Murr seemed to grasp, more than any of our other GOL interlocutors, the potential danger stemming from the second incident in particular, when two Hizballah vehicles intercepted the motorcade. Murr said he spoke directly with the ISF officer who serves as liaison officer with Hizballah to inform the organization that its actions contravened "the strategic position of Lebanon." Hizballah officials later responded to the Minister that the incident was the result of "misbehavior" by its operatives on the ground, and not any political decision by the organization. The Minister conveyed to Ambassador his confidence that there will be no similar incidents in the future. He said he will be personally involved in every future request from the embassy for security support for embassy travel.

Counter-terrorism: Arrest of UBL associate?  
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14. (C) The Minister discussed progress on the McDonalds bombing investigation, principally related to the recent arrest of a Yemeni national, Muammar Abdallah al-Awama (also known as Ibn al-Shadid). He said al-Shadid is still being interrogated by Lebanese Armed Forces G-2, and that he does not expect al-Awama to be handed over to the military tribunal for approximately two months. (Note: This will delay the tribunal that is hearing the cases of the other suspects, which was suspended last week due to al-Awama's arrest. End note.)

15. (C) Murr said al-Shadid has links to al-Qaeda associates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Lebanese security services are investigating the extent of those links, and also will be looking into the financing, including from abroad, of the McDonalds and other attacks on U.S. franchises. Murr said the GOL believes al-Shadid is the mastermind of all organizations linked to UBL in Lebanon, and it will be

important to see whether, with al-Shadid's arrest, any "dormant" al-Qaida operatives take over. The MOI has at least three more names of al-Shadid's associates, who are believed to be hiding in the Ain el-Hilweh refugee camp. Murr said they GOL would be trying to lure them out in order to arrest them.

¶6. (C) Murr noted that attacks on foreign interests in Lebanon are generally carried out during the winter months. He believes this is because of the large numbers of Gulf Arabs visiting Lebanon for tourism during the summer. In addition to plots uncovered that were directed at the Ambassador, the Minister said there were plans to target him, too, -- at the Ministry, at his private office, and at his home.

MOI security plan, prison conditions  
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¶7. (C) Murr said the Ministry was putting the finishing touches on a tough six-month internal security plan to address terrorism, organized crime, money laundering and narcotics. He undertook to provide a copy to the Ambassador upon completion. He cited 26,000 arrests since he took office in 2000, compared to only 3,000 arrests during the period 1990-2000. Murr admitted that prisons were crowded and that prison conditions were not good. He asserted that the International Committee of the Red Cross was welcome to visit any MOI prisons at any time, per an MOI decree. He explained that the ICRC had postponed a visit to Roumieh prison as part of a protest against the Ministry of Defense's refusal to allow the organization to visit military prison facilities.

Municipalities, decentralization, and electoral laws  
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¶8. (C) The Minister discussed three laws being prepared under his supervision: the municipalities, decentralization, and electoral laws. The municipalities law is currently being debated in parliament and should pass in about two months. The decentralization law should be submitted to the government for approval in about three weeks. This law would abolish the "caza" level between governorates and municipalities. Under the law, there would be 5-6 governors in the south, 5-6 governors in the north, four in Mount Lebanon, three in the Biq'a, and one in Beirut. There also would be a governing council comprised of governors and mayors, each with one vote. (Note: The decentralization law basically renames the cazas as governorates, breaking up the power of the current, smaller number of governors and providing greater voice for municipal leaders. End note.)

¶9. (C) The Minister emphasized that the decentralization law is not linked to the parliamentary elections law. He claimed the parliamentary election law being prepared will create "an atomic bomb" in Lebanon. He did not elaborate, but said he was "changing everything." Murr plans to submit the law (through the Council of Minister) to parliament and "let parliament refuse it," which he said will be difficult for the parliamentarians, who are accountable to the people, "and the people want change."

¶10. (C) Murr revealed that he is planning for electronic "e-voting" for the parliamentary elections. With electronic voting, he said, election results will be available as soon as the polls close. This will help preclude allegations of tampering, because there will be no time lag between the election and the announcement of results.

BATTLE